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ABSTRACT

Student apprehension about discussing intellectually "risky" ideas in the foreign language literature class can be addressed through construction of a classroom environment in which students gain confidence. The governing principle is the sequencing of risk. Students perceive risks to be in: (1) making a linguistic error; (2) making an error of recall or analysis; (3) venturing a "dumb" opinion; and (4) being seen as trying to impress the teacher or show superiority. Promoting universal participation not only spreads risk but also increases individuals' chances of success. Six factors help determine the degree of risk the student perceives: extent of personal identification with the answer; group size; group attitude; the individual student's attitude; certainty of correct response; and amount of time between question and response. Once these risk factors are identified, the teacher can adjust them to tailor classroom interaction to the level of difficulty and risk appropriate to the group. However, an overall gradual increase of risk, as students become more proficient, should also not translate into a constant uphill struggle. Students need opportunities to consolidate gains before moving on, and sometimes may need to return to a lower risk level when facing new or difficult material. (MSE)

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Identifying, Sequencing and Managing Intellectual Risks to Students: Discussion in the Foreign Language Literature Course

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When language teachers gather to talk about literature classes, we often lament the unwillingness of our students to take intellectual risks, to go out on a limb with an idea, to hazard educated guesses. All of these images attest to the danger that discussion poses for beginners. When instructors teach students to engage in physically dangerous activities, the risks are explicitly acknowledged and safety mechanisms put into place to protect the novices from their own mistakes, then gradually withdrawn as the students' skill increases. As teachers of an intellectually risky activity, we owe our novice discussants similar consideration and whatever degree of protection we can provide. Before we can construct any safety nets for our classroom, we must first identify the nature and sources of the risks our students face. Eventually we should be able to sequence activities of "graded risk" as we already sequence activities according to difficulty. It must be noted here that the level of risk does not automatically correspond to the level of difficulty. At the instructor's option, the risk of an activity at a given difficulty level can be adjusted using techniques presented in this paper. In making such adjustments, the teacher must bear in mind that the goal is not to minimize risk forever. As with sequencing activities by difficulty level, the governing principle in sequencing

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risk should be to start low and gradually increase the level as students confidence increases. While a spirited one-on-one defense of an intellectual position in front of the entire class cannot be the starting point for most students, it is an excellent goal. While the following observations center on discussion in the foreign language literature course, many of them apply equally to class participation in other classes.

As perceived by students, participation in classroom discussion of literature poses the following risks:

1. **I might make a language error.**
2. **I might make a mistake in recall or analysis of the book.**
3. **I might venture a "dumb" opinion.**
4. **I might be seen as trying to impress the teacher or put myself above other students.**

Note that these errors imply awareness of a variety of audiences. As teachers, we are usually aware of our own role as judges in the classroom, but we may be less aware than are our students of the presence of other judges in our classroom, judges whose criteria are different from and at times even in conflict with our own. The student is usually working in front of at least three audiences: the teacher, other students, and him or herself. In some cases any participation at all can threaten the student's status within the second group. Student from elementary through university levels report being teased by classmates about volunteering in class. Involving all students rather than relying on discussion with a few students who volunteer is thus doubly important--not only does it

fairly distribute the teacher's attention and the chances for success, it spreads the risk around.

In determining the degree of risk the student sees in each of the potential errors, at least six factors come into play.

1. the extent of personal identification with the answer

(Besides me, who will know that this is my mistake?)

2. the size of the group

(In front of how many people will I risk making this mistake?)

3. the attitude of the group

(What will the group think of the mistake and of me?)

4. the attitude of the student him/herself

a. self-esteem

(How confident am I of my self-worth?

(How much will a mistake here damage it?)

b. esteem for others involved

(How much does this group's opinion of my mistake matter to me?)

c. degree of investment in activity

(How important to me is the activity in which I may make the mistake?)

5. the certainty/uncertainty of correct response

(How likely is it that it will make a mistake?

Can I use some notes when I speak?)

6. the amount of time between question and response

(How soon do I have to respond? Will I have enough time to think it over?)

Identification of specific risk factors allows us to construct safety mechanisms which allow us as instructors to adjust that risk to suit the needs of the students at a given time. The following section offers possible responses to each of the risks described above. It is meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. No doubt you will be able to add mechanisms of your own devising.

1. Adapt the extent of personal identification with the answer.

Practice insulation: allow for distance between the student and his/her answer

a. Ask for brief written responses and then read some of them without mentioning names.

b. Have spokespersons report group responses.

c. Use polls, surveys and ballots as well as personal responses.

d. Respect privacy. Ask "what should the character have done?" and not "what would you do?"

e. Have students' summarize critics' points or reviews.

2. Change the size of the group.

a. Reduce group size and gradually increase it.

b. Compose groups in various ways. Try sometimes placing the quieter students all in one group without any of their more vocal classmates and other times seeding the group with some particularly encouraging classmates.

c. Provide some opportunities for speaking casually to the teacher alone, for instance, when you circulate during small-group activity.

d. Promote the formation of out-of-class study groups.

3-4. Try to change the attitude of the group and of the individual student with regard to class participation.

Explicitly praise risk-taking as well as correct answers.

a. Make it clear that you and others in the group value this form of risk-taking.

b. State it in terms which respect students' autonomy.

Willingness and ability to express one's own ideas are more positive values than "pleasing the teacher."

c. Discuss the difficulty and value of risk-taking in this context.

5. Increase the certainty of a correct response.

a. Help students increase the likelihood of a correct response by providing appropriate activities and models.

b. Provide opportunity to check answers before announcing them so publicly.

1. Build in time for informal comments and questions.

2. Filter student responses as above, but encourage students to comment on them,

so that students can see that others value their answer.

3. Encourage the authors to acknowledge and expand on or respond to the comments if they wish (after they have seen that the answer went over well.)
4. Occasionally have students write out their answers and read them rather than answer immediately.

6. Increase the time between question and response.

Have students consider a question for a few minutes, alone or in a group; or assign a question to be considered overnight.

Be prepared to adapt the risk level of activities as needed in a particular class. This should not mean automatically increasing the risk as soon as most of the class can handle a given level. An overall gradual increase of risk as students become more comfortable with participation should not translate into a constant uphill struggle for them. Students need opportunities to consolidate gains before moving on, and sometimes they need to return to a lower level of risk when facing new or difficult material. You are the best judge of what your students need if they are to progress. Intellectual risk management is one of many instruments for you to use in meeting those needs.

Adapted from a segment of "Beyond Comprehension Questions: Introducing Foreign Language Students to Literature" presented by Dr. Nance at the 1993 conference of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Rosemont, Illinois